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SUBJECT: CIVILIAN DEMINING EXPECTED IN COLOMBIA FOR 2010

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SUMMARY

11. (SBU) During the Second Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention Banning Anti-Personnel Landmines in Cartagena in December, the Government of Colombia (GOC) told Poloff they expect civilian demining to begin in 2010. The GOC also confirmed they would initially limit civilian demining to the British organization HALO Trust and then slowly include others. Landmines continue to be a significant problem in Colombia with nearly 800 new victims registered in 2008. Civilian demining will increase GOC capacity to demine communities affected by landmines. End Summary.

CIVILIAN DEMINING EXPECTED TO START IN 2010 IN COLOMBIA

12. (SBU) Acknowledging the need to increase humanitarian demining efforts, the GOC told us at the Second Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention (reftel) it planned to initiate civilian demining operations in 2010. Andres Davila, Director of Colombia's Presidential Program for Mine Action (PPAICMA) told Poloff the GOC intended to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the British organization HALO Trust and initially limit civilian demining to this organization. HALO Trust is only one of several international civilian demining organizations lobbying the GOC for a demining contract. Currently, all demining is done by the Colombian military in coordination with PPAICMA and the Organization of American States (OAS).

13. (SBU) Davila's announcement is not surprising, as the GOC began initial discussions of civilian demining in 2008. However, the process has been slow. HALO started discussing the MOU with the GOC in June 2009. The GOC held a workshop in October to discuss accreditation of civilian demining organizations. On October 23, Vice President Santos assured the international community the framework was nearly done, arguing the unique security concerns in Colombia required the GOC to be slow and cautious. HALO Trust and the British Embassy have complained about the GOC's sluggish pace.

LANDMINES POSE HUGE CHALLENGES FOR COLOMBIA

¶4. (U) Landmines continue to be a significant problem in Colombia, with nearly 800 new victims registered in 2008 -- the highest number worldwide. However, from January to November 2009 there were 544 new landmine victims (civilian and military), a 26% decrease from the same period in 2008. PPAICMA estimates landmines are spread throughout 40 percent of Colombia's national territory, affecting 31 of the 32 departments. Illegal armed groups, primarily the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), continue to use landmines as a weapon of war and have planted over 50,000 mines throughout Colombia, according to PPAICMA (Note: In late 1997 Colombia signed the Ottawa Convention banning the use of anti-personnel mines and as of 1998 the Colombian Military stopped producing new mines. End Note.)

INCREASED CAPACITY THROUGH CIVILIAN DEMINING

¶5. (SBU) Anti-landmine groups have long advocated for civilian demining operations. Currently, there are six humanitarian demining platoons in the Colombian military, but three are dedicated to demining military minefields and are not expected to finish demining the eight remaining fields until March 2011. The GOC plans to expand the humanitarian demining program to 14 platoons, but Carl Case, OAS Director of the Office of Humanitarian Mine Action, admitted the demand from affected communities will

surpass the platoons' capacity.

¶6. (U) European countries, including France and Britain, are lobbying the GOC to allow civilian demining because their governments prefer funding civilian rather than military demining programs. While various countries contribute to mine action activities, including victims' assistance, only the United States, Canada, and Italy regularly provide funds for mine clearance (Spain has provided training in the past and Japan recently donated some demining equipment). The United States is the largest contributor, with \$840,000 donated by the Department of State in 2009 and \$470,000 provided by the U.S. Southern Command since 2007.

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